

Working Paper 2: Teaching English as a school subject and the role of gender: evidence from Bangladeshi, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan

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Introduction

This working paper has been prepared as part of our British Council-funded project, *English as a school subject: learning effective practices from low level primary English language teachers*, which began in March 2021 (<https://ess.stir.ac.uk/>). The project team is based in Bangladesh, England, Malawi, Mexico, Scotland and Uzbekistan. One of our research questions is: *Are there differences according to gender in how children perceive the value of English and the classroom practices they prefer?* During our data collection, we also extended this question to include the perceptions of teachers.

Gender would appear to be an “individual” variable or characteristic. Nevertheless, gender is a “complex system of social relations and discursive practices, differentially constructed in local contexts [e.g., Malawi, Uzbekistan, Mexico and/or Bangladesh] … [that] interacts with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, and social status in framing students’ language learning experiences, trajectories, and outcomes” (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 504). Within these social relations, women have been historically excluded and experienced discriminatory practices. Exclusion and discrimination are exacerbated if a woman is black, Indigenous, and/or poor, just to mention a few other social factors. Achieving gender equality is one of the main goals of UNESCO, and is one of their priorities through its 2030 agenda. Its importance is underlined by the fact more girls than boys globally remain out of school and two thirds out of the 750 million adults without basic literacy skills are women (UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action).

According to Yoong (2018), the connection between gender and language was first examined in a systematic way in the 1970s, with some studies having an explicit political purpose: gender equality (e.g., Lakoff, 1975; Spender, 1980). In language studies, the work of Judith Butler (1990) has been particularly influential. She sees gender as something people ‘do’ rather than ‘have’. According to Butler (1990), gender is dynamic, fluid and performatively constituted in interaction, rather than an inherent trait. In English language teaching specifically, recent years have seen an increase in interest in the field (e.g., Davis and Skilton-Sylvester 2004; Nelson 2009; Norton 2016; Norton and Pavlenko 2004; Norton and Toohey, 2012). These studies have focused on different areas such as (1) identity; (2) teaching materials and textbooks; and (3) teacher education.

In the area of primary school teaching specifically, attention has been paid to the feminized nature of the role. There are frequent calls by, for example, parents, governments and teachers for more male primary school teachers because of a supposed need for role models for boys. While the teachers in Santos and Amâncio's (2019) study did not find the gender imbalance between male and female teachers to be problematic, they perceived that there would be educational benefits to boys having male role models. However, in reviewing the literature, McDowell and Klattenberg (2018) note that there is little evidence that children judge teachers as role models based on their gender or even that teachers are seen as key role models at all. Moreover, the gender of the teacher seems to make no difference to attainment levels. However, stereotypes about children and how they behave can lead to teacher bias by both male and female teachers (*ibid.*), a finding that has echoes in our research. To underline that gender in teachers is not a key factor, McDowell and Klattenberg (2018), in their study of the language teachers use in class for the purposes of discipline, found that all the teachers used linguistics strategies associated with both masculine and feminine styles for similar purposes.

A different aspect of the feminized nature of primary school teaching emerged from Santos and Amâncio's (2019) study. Far from being marginalised or tokenised, they found that male teachers enjoyed positive discrimination through being 'cherished' and ascending more rapidly to higher positions. The male teachers themselves perceived that they received preferential treatment from their female colleagues and were 'pushed' into higher positions. As Santos and Amâncio (2019, p. 207) note, this result "counts on the contribution of women, a group socially dominated in the majority context, which does not prove the case when men are in a majority context".

Overall, little research has been done focusing on children, gender and ELT, especially in public elementary schools (see Potestades, 2021, for a recent study exploring gender in a private school with Filipino children). Our study and this working paper is a first step towards filling this gap and it presents some of our initial findings around the role of gender in teaching English as a school subject in primary education.

The project

The project aims to respond to the following research questions:

1. What classroom practices do teachers and children with low levels of English in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan engage in to support English learning?
2. What are the similarities and differences in classroom practices between Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan?
3. How do primary school children in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan engage with different language learning pedagogies?
4. Are there differences according to gender in how children perceive the value of English and the classroom practices they prefer?
5. In what ways does translanguaging support the learning of English in the primary school classroom in Bangladesh, Malawi, Mexico and Uzbekistan?

To answer these questions, the project adopts a qualitative, inquiry-based design, working with teachers and students in the four countries. In this working paper, we report on stage 1 of the project, which has now been completed. Data collection tools were teacher interviews, children's focus groups and a survey conducted by children about English language learning and teaching.

Methodology

The first stage of the project consisted of:

- Teacher interviews. Ten in-depth interviews were carried out in each country with teachers of English as a school subject in state primary schools¹ ($n=40$). The interviews focused on topics such as the teachers' biographies, the strategies they use in class, their views on translanguaging pedagogies, the challenges they face in their role and their perceptions of gender in the classroom. Details of the interviews are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Teacher interviews

Country:	Bangladesh	Mexico	Malawi	Uzbekistan
Schools:	10 primary school teachers from urban, semi-urban and rural schools ($n=40$)			
Period:	May – October 2021, February 2022			
Language:	Bangla	Spanish	Chichewa	English
Gender:	3 Male 7 Female	3 Male 7 Female	6 Male 4 Female	10 female
Duration:	1.5 – 2 hours			
Mode:	On-line via Zoom		Face-to-face at local schools	
Data collection: interviews	Video, transcription, translation		Audio, transcription, translation	

¹ In Bangladesh, of the 10 schools, 8 were public and 2 were private/NGO, which follow the same curriculum as state schools and cater to children from low socio-economic backgrounds.

- Children's focus groups. Three focus group discussions were carried out in each country with children, ages seven and above ($n=12$). One focus group was a mix of boys and girls, one group was boys only and one group girls only. The single-sex groups were introduced to ensure girls were able to speak freely and voice their opinions. The purpose of the focus groups is to understand the children's perspectives on learning English, what they like and do not like about English classes, the benefits they think English brings, and how knowing English might help them to reach their personal goals. We also asked their views on translanguaging pedagogies, although this was presented in a child-friendly way. The single-sex groups supported our response to research question 4: *Are there differences according to gender in how children perceive the value of English?* Details of the focus groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Children's focus groups

Context:	Bangladesh	Mexico	Malawi	Uzbekistan
Number of students	6 girls and 6 boys	9 girls and 8 boys	8 girls and 7 boys	5 boys and 5 girls
Age range:	10–12 years of age	10–11 years of age	10 – 12 years of age	9–10 years of age
Grade:	5	5	6	4
FGD mode:	Face-to-face	On-line	Face-to-face	Face-to-face
Language:	Bangla	Spanish	Chichewa	Russian

- Children's surveys. The children were given the opportunity to become co-researchers through designing and administering surveys of their own about learning English (1 per country; $n=4$) for their peers. In both Malawi and Uzbekistan, the survey was introduced and conducted in schools over three days. In Bangladesh, however, lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions meant that the survey element had to be condensed into one school visit, which limited the amount of time that could be spent on preparing the children. In Mexico, the survey was conducted via Zoom, with researchers preparing the children about survey and survey data, children designing and piloting questions, and, finally, the survey being advertised via class WhatsApp groups and taken online through Google Forms. It should be noted that the considerable variation in the ways in which the surveys were carried out mean that the data are not comparable. However, the children's findings do offer some insights into gender issues.

The questions from the teacher interviews and children's focus groups that specifically related to gender are presented in the Appendix. The children's survey questions are not included as these varied from country to country.

Preliminary Findings

Gender issues are raised in a number of both direct and indirect ways in our data.

As is well-established, the majority of primary school teachers, including teachers of English, are female (Garton et al., 2010). This is reflected in the participants in this study, with 12 male teachers interviewed as opposed to 28 females. In Uzbekistan, for example, where all 10 teachers interviewed were female, married women prefer to work as primary school teachers so that they can balance work and family duties more easily (observation by the research team). The exception was Malawi, where six of the ten teachers interviewed were male. However, it is noteworthy that male primary school teachers in Malawi generally teach higher grades, while lower grades are the domain of female teachers, although this is often because they need to finish early to attend to household chores. Overall, there are fewer female teachers in rural schools in Malawi.

In-class learning

In all four countries, the majority of teachers felt there was no gender discrimination of teachers or children in schools and that they treated the children equally in their classes, a perception confirmed by the children in the focus groups. For example, one focus group in Mexico said that girls and boys are treated the same way by the teacher and she gives them the same opportunity to participate. However, one male teacher in a rural school in Bangladesh said he treated boys and girls differently. Being male, he felt he had to be particularly sensitive towards the girls whom he perceived to be shy and soft. They tended to cry if he was strict, and would say bad things about him outside class, so he was afraid for his reputation. He also said he hesitated to go too near the girls because of the strict Islamic culture. This example shows that male primary school teachers may face particular issues not faced by female teachers, as also identified by McDowell and Klattenberg (2018).

However, despite teachers and students believing that gender equality was achieved in class, there were indications that the treatment of boys and girls may be more nuanced. One teacher in Mexico claimed that boys and girls were not treated in the same way, while, in a focus group in Malawi, the children said that the teacher asked both boys and girls to respond to questions, but sometimes the girls are asked more questions than boys to encourage them to do well as they do not perform as well as the boys.

Further indications of the potential complexity of gender differences in class emerged when both the teachers and the children spoke about the behaviour of boys and girls. The teachers in Bangladesh reported that the boys were a bigger challenge to teach because they are naughty and fight in class, while in Mexico, pre-pandemic, the children noted that the teacher asked them to sit boy-girl-boy-girl, as sometimes boys were 'restless'. The teachers in Uzbekistan noted that boys are usually physically stronger and 'impatient, rowdy and naughty', and therefore treated more strictly; the girls in the Uzbeki single-gender focus group complained that the boys are noisy and may interrupt the lesson. Teachers in Bangladesh, Malawi and Uzbekistan, as well as the children in Malawi, said that girls are shy and do not speak up in class, or do not express themselves as clearly as boys. The teachers in Malawi noted that girls

avoid standing up and speaking in class because of cultural norms. The teachers in Uzbekistan said that girls are more sensitive and are treated more gently.

These data would seem to show that, whilst on a conscious, surface level, neither teachers nor children perceive gender differences in the way in which girls and boys are treated in class, the reports of behaviours suggest that it is unlikely that boys are girls are treated in the same way. Indeed, as we have shown, specific examples of differences were given once details were elicited. Further research, particularly in the form of classroom observations, is needed in order to ascertain whether differences in the way children are treated in class exist and the effect that may have on both learning outcomes and on children's perceptions of self and others.

Learner preferences

Differences were also evident in the types of activities that boys and girls preferred in class. Teachers in Malawi said that boys enjoy role playing because that is an opportunity to 'show off'. Teachers in both Mexico and Uzbekistan noted that girls prefer more creative activities, liking drawing, painting, singing and making things, while boys prefer more physical activities and playing video games. This was confirmed by the children in Mexico, who said that girls like to draw, colour, and play games (puzzles, crossword puzzles); boys like to draw, do physical activities, and play board games. Boys in Bangladesh also generally enjoy games, while girls like reading and doing classwork.

However, not all the teachers felt that there was any difference in children's preferences and there is no evidence in our data that teachers adapt their teaching to cater for such preferences, although, again, further research here would be necessary.

Learner achievement

There were mixed perceptions when it came to achievement. The children in Bangladesh maintained that differences in achievement depend on effort, not on gender. Those who came to class every day and listened to the teacher got good grades. However, in the separate gender groups, both boys and girls agreed that the girls do better in English, presumably because they attend and listen, given the comments on boys' behaviour reported above. The children in Mexico did not perceive any gender differences in achievement and claimed that both genders answer difficult questions. However, half of the Mexican teachers believed that girls are better at English for various reasons, including that they do the best homework, are more creative, are more focused and faster, and are more flexible and open. In Uzbekistan the boys think that they perform better in English, while the girls insist that they cope better with the language. In Malawi, the majority of children in both the child-led surveys and the focus group discussions indicated that both boys and girls compete in getting good grades and also in responding to difficult questions.

Learners' attitudes to English

Where all the children seemed to be in agreement was in their positive attitude towards learning English. This could be because the children who took part in the focus groups were those with positive attitudes or because they felt they could not be critical. However, there was evidence of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The children of both genders in Bangladesh felt that English is important and said that they were interested in it. For the children in Malawi, boys and girls both said it is their favourite subject and they also need it to access secondary and university education. The Mexican children said that they were happy to learn English because it means they will be able to travel around the world, get a good job and speak with tourists.

They recognized that English is important to be able to speak to people in different countries. The Uzbek children were sure they would need English to enter university and to get a well-paid job.

Learners' future aspirations

Whilst not strictly connected with English classes, there are interesting observations concerning gender differences in the wider context, including career choice and responsibilities outside the classroom which can impact on schooling.

In terms of professional aspirations, there is evidence from the children's focus groups of traditionally gendered career choices, such as nurse, teacher, model and hairdresser for girls, and professional footballer, soldier, pilot, astronaut for boys. However, we also found numerous examples of what might be seen as 'non-traditional' career choices from the girls, but not from the boys. Girls also want to be bank managers (Malawi), lawyers, police officers, businesswomen (Mexico) and doctors (Malawi and Uzbekistan). The children also made the link between English and career choice, with the children in Bangladesh saying that English is important in achieving their career aspirations, while those in Mexico said it is important for getting a good job. However, the children in Bangladesh also said that, above all, they wanted to be good human beings.

Roles inside and outside the classroom

In all countries, children are expected to do chores inside the classroom and at home. In Malawi, chores were reported as being shared equally, with both boys and girls sweeping and mopping the classroom as well as cleaning outside together. In Uzbekistan, on the other hand, both the teachers and the children reported that physical tasks are gendered, with boys doing more "masculine work", such as moving the desks and carrying heavy things, while girls do more "feminine" tasks, such as taking care of plants, and cleaning the board.

In Malawi and in Bangladesh, equal treatment extended to classroom chores. The children in Malawi reported that both boys and girls sweep and mop the classroom as well as clean outside together. In Bangladesh, light classroom chores, such as cleaning the board and tidying up, are given equally to girls and boys, while children do not usually do heavier chores like cleaning classrooms.

Finally, the impact of gender was most evident when both teachers and children spoke of roles outside the classroom, particularly at home. So, for example, while in Malawi both genders did the same school chores, this was not the case in the home where chores are differentiated. Girls in Malawi also drop out of school early because of marriage and pregnancy. Girls are expected to help their mothers with housework in Mexico, too, while both boys and girls will help their parents with their jobs, such as selling in the local market. In Bangladesh, especially in rural areas during the pandemic, boys joined the informal labour force to augment the family income. Girls are expected to carry out household chores and look after young siblings to the extent that they cannot study at home.

Conclusion

It is heartening that teachers and children both appear to recognise that boys and girls should be treated equally in class and that both genders reported here (male/female) enjoy and want to do well at English. However, as the data show, there is evidence of differences in how boys and girls behave, the kinds of learning activities they prefer, their perceptions of academic

achievement, their ambitions for the future and the kind of work they do, both inside and outside school. It is also clear in the data that teachers perceive that there are differences between boys and girls which might impact on how they treat them in class. Going forward, the project team aims to analyse the recordings of the mixed focus groups from an interactional perspective in order to identify whether any gender differences are apparent in how children respond to questions. We will also analyse classroom video data to see how teachers work with boys and girls with a view to identifying practices which may be affected by gender.

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Appendix

Questions related to gender from the teacher interviews (TI), children's focus groups (CFG)

TI	CFG
1) Who are the strongest students in your classes? Why are they strong, do you think?	1. a) What do you like doing in English classes? b) What don't you like doing?
2) Do the students value English? Do boys and girls have different attitudes?	2. Do you think everyone (boys and girls) in your English classes get the same chances to speak?
3) Will English be useful for students in their future lives, do you think? In what ways?	3. Between boys and girls, who do you think is good at English in your class?
4) Are girls and boys treated the same in your school?	4. Between boys and girls, who answers the difficult questions in your class?
5) What are the challenges of teaching boys? Of teaching girls?	5. Do boys and girls ever miss school here? Why?
6) Are male and female teachers treated the same in the school?	6. Where do boys and girls sit in your English class?
7) How do the students sit in class? Why?	7a) What do you want to be when you leave school? b) Do you think that is possible? What will you have to do?
8) Are students happy to speak English in class? Why/why not?	8a) Will English help you when you leave school? b) What do your parents think about you learning English?
9) How do students travel to school? How far away do they live?	9a) Where do you live? b) What can you say about your safety on your daily journey to and from school?
10) What do students do before and after school? Is it different for boys and girls?	10. What do you do before going to school and after knocking off from school?